

TESTIMONY OF BEN BURKETT

2007 FARM BILL LISTENING FORUM WITH THE HONORABLE MIKE JOHANNIS

TUSKEGEE UNIVERSITY

August 25, 2005

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you today. My name is Ben F. Burkett and I am a 4th generation farmer of 255 acres in southern Mississippi. I am also the State Coordinator for the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives which is a state association of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund. Our organization serves as a catalyst and advocate for change for small and limited-resource minority farmers throughout the southeastern United States.

Small farmers across the nation face many challenges in areas of production, management, and marketing. During the past two years, I, and other farmers from the state of Mississippi, small farm leaders, community-based organizations, and educational institutions have identified some significant needs impacting the lives of small farmers. Some of the most urgent needs include conservation practices, soil and air quality, low cost irrigation systems, and fencing.

In response the USDA/NRCS set aside 6 million dollars for twelve southern states to address these issues through a special initiative called the "Small Scale/Limited-Resource Farmers Initiative." This special initiative is making tremendous impact on these critical needs. In Mississippi, more than 200 small farmers signed up for this program and approximately 151 were approved to receive funds from the 6 million dollar set aside. The success in Mississippi and other states happened as a result of a collective working relationship.

In partnership with community-based organizations and local USDA agencies, 1890 land-grant institutions, are able to effectively deliver educational and technical information to small farmers and their communities.

This small farm outreach initiative, through USDA special funding, provided the resources necessary to addressing the issues identified with soil quality, low cost irrigation, fencing, and conservation practices. Also, the initiative created new enthusiasm and strengthened the existing collaborative working relationships between local agencies, community-based organizations, and educational institutions.

Further research is needed in the areas of soil quality and environmental and natural resources to identify new and cutting-edge solutions to present and emerging needs. More technical assistance is needed to help small farmers enhance their production, management, and marketing skills.

Because of the demonstrated impact of the set aside funds, we are now requesting that this initiative be continued at a greater level of funding on a continuing basis. We are requesting that additional funding be given to the 1890's--Alcorn State University and Tuskegee University. And, we are asking for additional funding for community-based organizations--the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, and the Arkansas Farm and Land so that they will be better equipped to build greater capacity to serve the small farmers in their critical need areas and continue to provide technical assistance after receiving these funds.

Ben Burkett
State Coordinator
Mississippi Association of Cooperatives

FUNDING FOR THE 1890 LAND GRANT INSTITUTIONS RURAL ENTREPRENEURIAL PROGRAM OUTREACH INITIATIVE

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- Started in 1993/1994
- Under USDA/RBS
- 16 to 17 1890 land grant institutions
- Accomplishments include (1) small business creation, (2) increase in awareness of USDA/RD programs in rural, minority communities; (3) enhanced community-based organization access to development resources, etc.
- the major, sometimes only rural business development program at 1890 Institutions for economically challenged rural areas in the Southern Black Belt
- ~~Funding~~ levels and consistency have created instability in the programs
- Recently reduction in the maximum grant per institution from \$150,000 to \$100,000
- ⊗ Minimum of \$300,000 per year and per institution would allow better outreach to rural communities for entrepreneurial development
- ⊗ Inclusion as line item along with Section 2501 would guarantee stability in this critical program
- ⊗ A minimum of 3 year per funding will ensure impact in terms of results achieved

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